

Title: **Rate Change Notification**

Technical Field:

This invention relates to the adjustment of charges for telecommunications calls in response to telecommunications traffic conditions.

Problem:

In wireless cellular telecommunications systems, a major capital resource is the number of radio channels available for communicating with mobile stations in particular areas. The number of channels is determined by the number of transceivers provided for each cell, and the requirement that transceivers sharing a common frequency, time-slot, or code, not interfere with each other. During the busy hour, a radio channel for an additional call is frequently not available, but during off-peak periods or even during occasional intervals in the busy hour, channels are available. A service provider must balance the cost of providing enough transceivers to serve most calls during the busy hour against the cost of a large number of transceivers that are under utilized outside the busy hour. A problem of the prior art therefore, is that frequently many channels are available for calls, but these channels are not being used. This reduces the overall cost effectiveness of a cellular telecommunications system.

Solution:

The above problem is substantially alleviated, and an advance is made over the teachings of the prior art in accordance with this invention, wherein a mobile cellular telecommunications system monitors the number of radio channels available to users, and upon detecting large numbers of available channels in one or more cellular areas, notifies users of mobile stations in those areas of this condition, and encourages those users to place calls by offering a lower rate for calls placed at that time. Advantageously, this arrangement encourages a better utilization of the radio channels of the mobile cellular telecommunications system.

In accordance with various embodiments of the invention, the mobile stations in an affected area comprising one or more cell sites and/or sectors are notified by some broadcast arrangement, or by a short message service message. It is an option for the carrier whether to reduce the rate for all customers placing calls during the interval of low channel usage, or only to reduce the rates for customers who have been informed of the low channel usage. In accordance with one preferred embodiment of the invention, the reduced rate is no longer available for new calls as soon as the number of available channels in the area goes below a threshold.

In accordance with another feature of this invention, the notification may be

offered to everyone, or only to subscribers to a notification service. Advantageously, such subscribers are likely to be heavy users of the service.

The feature can also be used in a reverse sense, wherein subscribers of low cost calling plans are notified when rates are higher because of decreased available radio channel capacity.

Brief Description of the Drawing(s):

Figure 1 is a block diagram of a cellular telecommunications system; and

Figures 2 and 3 are flow diagrams illustrating the operation of Applicants' method.

Detailed Description:

Figure 1 is a block diagram illustrating a mobile telecommunications system. Everything in Figure 1 is from the prior art except the software and the database of the Mobile Switching Center. Mobile Switching Center (1) controls a number of cell sites such as cell sites (10), . . . , (11). It is connected to the cell sites by transmission links (8), . . . , (9). The cell sites are connected to mobile stations such as mobile station (20) by radio links such as radio links (18) and (19), connecting cell sites (10) and (11), respectively, to mobile station (20). The radio links are limited resources in

that each cell site can communicate only with a limited number of mobile stations via a limited number of radio links.

The Mobile Switching Center (1) is controlled by processor (2), comprising a database (3) for storing data necessary to perform the methods described in Figures 2 and 3. The processor (2) is controlled by a program (4) stored in the memory of the processor. In this simple diagram, the processor means for controlling the Mobile Switching Center are shown as a processor (2) within MSC (1). In other embodiments, the processor (2) and the database (3) can be augmented by adjunct processors and adjunct databases to provide the information necessary for controlling the Mobile Switching Center. For example, a database of an adjunct processor might be used to store the identification of mobile stations having special classes of service in accordance with this invention. An adjunct database can be used for storing such information as the threshold number of radio channels in use for triggering either a lower tariff or a higher tariff.

Briefly, the Mobile Switching Center communicates with the Public Switched Telephone Network (30) over access links 31, . . . , 32, and communicates with a number of cell sites (10, . . . , 11) over communication and control transmission links 8, . . . , 9. The cell sites in turn then communicate with mobile stations via radio communication

and control links (18, . . . , 19).

Figure 2 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of one aspect of Applicants' invention. The Mobile Switching Center, MSC (1), monitors channel use in the cell sites which it controls, (Action Block 101). If a large area is served by a plurality of Mobile Switching Centers (MSCs), these switching centers can exchange channel usage data pertaining to their respective cell sites. If an MSC detects that channel usage is below threshold in a particular area comprising one or more cells and/or sectors, (Action Block 103), the MSC informs mobile stations operating in that area of a lower billing rate, (Action Block 105). The MSC can maintain threshold data for each area, which can be defined by data in the database under the control of the System Administrator (Figure 1) at terminal (40). In accordance with one preferred embodiment, the MSC maintains two thresholds for each defined area: a first threshold for initiating a lower rate, and a second threshold (slightly higher than the first threshold) for terminating the offer of the lower rates. In addition, in accordance with one preferred embodiment, the MSC maintains thresholds for cell sites in each specific area so that if any of these cell sites have a channel usage exceeding that threshold, the lower rates will not be offered. The MSC notifies mobile stations operating in the appropriate area by some type of broadcast message or by individual short message service (SMS)

messages relayed through the cell sites. The individual mobile stations will be equipped to alert the customer in case of receipt of either of these messages.

Responsive to receipt of one of these messages, a user at a mobile station in the area in which the low channel usage was detected originates a call, (Action Block 107).

When the MSC prepares a billing record for that call, the MSC marks the billing record with a reduced rate mark which is interpreted in the billing center so that the charge to the customer is less, (Action Block 109).

A reduced charge can be, for example, a simple percentage reduction of the normal charge, a charge at off-peak pricing during an on-peak period, or a reduction in the number of minutes for which the call is billed.

In accordance with another embodiment of Applicants' invention, an increase tariff can be charged if the number of channels in use when a customer places a call exceeds a different, higher threshold. If the customer is to be charged more for this call, the customer can be notified through, for example, a short message service message. For the higher costs during especially busy periods, a special tariff class of service may be required; customers having this special class of service would have generally lower charges, or a generally lower basic rate, but would have to be willing to pay higher rates when warned of high usage of the channels in their present cell.

Figure 3 illustrates this other aspect of Applicants' invention. The MSC monitors channel usage in an area, (Action Block 201). An area defined here, as in the case of Figure 2, comprises one or more cells and/or sectors. The MSC detects that channel usage is above a threshold in an area, (Action Block 203). The MSC, via the cell sites, notifies the mobile stations operating in that area that originating calls will be charged at a higher rate (Action Block 205). Alternatively, MSs can be notified of the higher rates after a call is originated. A user of a mobile station (MS) in that area originates a call (Action Block 207). If the MS continues the originated call, then the MSC marks the billing record for the call with an increased rate indication, (Action Block 209).

The above description is of one preferred embodiment of Applicants' invention.

Many other embodiments will be apparent to those of ordinary skill without departing from the scope of this invention. The invention is limited only by the attached Claims.